County of San Diego
Agriculture, Weights and Measures

Bougainvillea Looper

Disclisioprocta stellata (Guenee)

Bougainvillea looper, as the name suggests, feeds primarily on bougainvillea, but has also been reported to feed on other plants in the Nyctaginaceae family, such as the four-o'clock (*Mirabilis jalapa*). This looper has most often been observed feeding on the common purple bougainvillea, but it does not appear to have a preference for one bougainvillea variety over another—it likes them all.

Description
The bougainvillea looper is a green or brown caterpillar about one inch long. It is also called "inchworm" or "measuring worm" because it moves in alternate contractions and expansions suggestive of measuring. The looper larva mimics stems and branches very well and feeds primarily at night, which is why you may see the damage but fail to find the culprit on the plant. The adult is a moth, a very fast flyer with a one inch wingspan. Like the larva, it also is active at night, when it is believed to lay its eggs on the underside of bougainvillea leaves. This insect is also called the Somber Carpet Moth because of the brown color of the adult.

Damage
The bougainvillea looper feeds from the edges of the leaves resulting in severe scalloping of the foliage. Attacks begin on the young, tender shoots and leaves before progressing down the stem. The loopers may move down the stems during the night and take shelter on the larger interior branches during the day. As the population multiplies, entire shrubs can be defoliated. To date, the bougainvillea looper has not generally been regarded as a serious pest. The insect will cause significant visual damage to bougainvillea, although this does not apparently result in the death of the plants.

Distribution
The bougainvillea looper was found in the coastal area of San Diego for the first time in August 2006. This pest is a very wide-ranging, migratory species, orginally from tropical America and can travel great distances on air currents. It has been found in the eastern United States as far north as Michigan. In the past decade, this pest has become established throughout the Hawaiian Islands.

Control
Bacillus thuringiensis (BT, or Dipel®) should be effective on the loopers without harming other insects that may biologically control them, such as parasitic, mud, and paper wasps. Insectical oils and soaps will not control caterpillars such as the looper.

Spinosad and most synthetic insecticides with labels permitting use against caterpillars on landscape ornamentals, will likely kill the bougainvillea looper, although these products are often destructive to beneficial insects as well. Spraying insecticides late in the evening is recommended. This is when the bougainvillea looper caterpillars and adult moths are active, and also when the beneficial insects are not likely to be active.

Currently, this pest has a California statewide "Q" rating which means the full economic impact of this pest has not been determined. While we don't believe this will become a major agricultural pest, if you see this or any other suspicious insect, please report it to the County, Agriculture, Weights and Measures Entomology lab at 858-694-3897.

For more information, please visit our website at sdcawm.org or email us at sdcawm@sdcounty.ca.gov

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